

China

Stephen Jones, *Daoist Priests of the Li Family: Ritual Life in Village China*

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In recent years, the publication of religious studies in north China has been fruitful, which in turn has helped scholars rigidify their related insights, yet vivid descriptions of Daoists in rural China are still lacking. As an inspiring and milestone ethnography, Stephen Jones's *Daoist Priests of the Li Family: Ritual Life in Village China* focuses on Daoists and their religious life in north China. Two principles running through this book and its companion volume *In Search of the Folk Daoists of North China* (2010) are that "Dao is not far from people" (Zhu 2011, 25) and "people can promote the Dao, but not the Dao" (Yang 2019, 235). Jones shows us a different perspective of Daoism through his depiction of the Daoists in rural life, which endeavors to break through the rigid understandings of Daoists and Daoism in Chinese studies. The rural household Daoists in his writings were also living as social men. Jones achieves this through his way of introducing anthropological approaches into Daoist studies, which improves the past limited understandings.

For a long time, a series of binary structures have dominated Daoist studies, which has tended to portray an idealized image of Daoism. As a constructed ideal paradigm, it refers to a series of conceptual categories, including Complete Perfection (Quanzhen)/Orthodox Unity (Zhengyi) temple, priests/household Daoists, elite/lay, and periphery/core regions. Furthermore, these bifurcated categories lead to labeling and preconception.

For instance, Quanzhen Daoism has long been more common in the north, yet Zhengyi Daoism has been more prominent in the south. It has also led to the widespread use of home altars and ritual manuals or texts from generation to generation, stressing the importance of being registered for becoming a Daoist and hiring professional music bands for their offering (*zhai*) and sacrifice (*jiao*). Accordingly, Jones describes a different picture for rural Daoism in northern China, which is very different from the Southern Daoism paradigm. Jones intended to portray an accurate depiction of Daoists and Daoism following his fieldwork and the fact that Daoism is not what it used to be.

Jones's monograph attempts to criticize the former paradigm in Daoist studies in which Daoists play the part of an abstract existence and are silent and passive in the ritual process and act as a role of instrumental value. The former paradigm paints Daoists as having to follow strict rules, of being regulated or registered, and having no choice but to practice rituals prescriptively without personality. Diversity and local variations hardly change the traditional ritual sequence and details that strictly adhere to ritual manuals. These ritual traditions have a longing for a golden age where rituals are complex and intact. Different from the former ideal, Jones shows a new Daoism in which networks of household Daoists play crucial parts, and in which the binary category Complete Perfection/Orthodox Unity ceases to be effective. These actors function as semi-peasant and semi-Daoists without worshipping home altars or being registered. This transmission network resembles the pattern of the White Lotus, which was attached to the original village network in Naquin's work (1976). Spirit mediums, shawm bands (*gujiang*), and lay ritual masters cooperate frequently and naturally and work in a common symbiotic system. A ritual wind ensemble (*shengguan*) is intrinsic to their ritual rather than hiring musicians. In other words, Daoists also play the role of musicians who cooperate in common ritual performance under the different titles of Quanzhen/Zhengyi.

Jones endeavored to construct a new paradigm for Daoist studies. His ethnography criticized and corrected the imperfections of the former paradigm. He was reluctant to acknowledge the Daoism we previously knew, which is based on existing studies rather than obtained from fieldwork. He stressed in his research the ritual performance that presents a kind of descriptive Daoist ritual—which prefers performative to prescriptive, oral to written, vocal to *shengguan*—rather than the prescriptive one. From his perspective, scholars should pay more attention to Daoist ritual variation and flexibility in their ritual sequences, music, manuals, and texts instead of their fixed parts. In his writings, the Daoist ritual that represents recreation and invention of tradition in the fracture of history rejects any nostalgia for a golden age. Compared with the former paradigm based on the written media, Jones avoids accepting a timeless historical framework. Instead, he focused on the changing phenomena of Daoists and Daoism itself. The history he combed does not consist of archives but memory and oral narrative. The Daoists with distinctive personalities who lived in the eras ranging from late imperial China to republic, and from occupation warfare (the 1940s), Land Reform, The Great Leap Forward, and Cultural Revolution, to Reform and Opening, are the witness of great transformations in Chinese history.

By saying goodbye to the ideal Daoism portrayed in previous studies, this ethnography sheds light on the work of other authors. As far as the ritual classification is concerned, people generally classify Daoist rituals under the framework of fast (*zhai*) and offering (*jiao*) as unalterable principles. However, scholars also adopted local terminologies, such as blowing, beating, writing, reciting, and looking, which are mainly insiders'

concepts, for classifying the three main ritual types: funeral scriptures (*baijing*), earth scriptures (*tujing*), and temple scriptures (*miaojing*). The preference for vocals to fixed, labeled melodies gives considerable attention to the former blind spot in studies of ethnomusicology that places more weight on instruments than vocal performance such as sung hymns. Therefore, this preference regards ritual as random recombination with a high possibility of variation. In addition, scholars considered ritual experts are regarded as lay masters, such as *guijiang* and spirit medium, for delineating the bio-system of rural regions in northern China.

This book aims to establish a precedent and open a new paradigm in the field of Daoist studies. It is a brilliant attempt to introduce anthropological approaches into Daoism that transcend the Southern Daoism pattern. Accordingly, it challenges the paradigm of Southern Daoism and the ideal Daoism built on historical texts that are devoid of ethnographic data and criticizes the trend of pursuing perfect narratives in accordance with this former paradigm. This book raises various questions: Does northern China have a unique religion? How should scholars face the dialectic debate of Daoism versus Daoisms while transcending the existing studies? The adoption of such an approach provides new perspectives and questions concerning the concept of Daoism.¹

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